

## Civil War Book Review

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Winter 2014

Article 4

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### Andrew Jackson, Southerner

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#### Recommended Citation

Pratt, Adam (2014) "Andrew Jackson, Southerner," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.1.05

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss1/4>

## Review

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**Cheatham, Mark R.** *Andrew Jackson, Southerner*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780807150986

### Andrew Jackson: A Man of the Southern Frontier

Mark Cheatham's new biography of the seventh president, *Andrew Jackson, Southerner*, relocates Jackson not as a man of the frontier, nor as a man who has a political era named for him, but as a man rooted in the ethos of honor, patriarchy, and slaveholding of the antebellum south. Indeed, it took the author two pages to declare that the standard interpretation of Jackson as the personification of the frontier put forth by Frederick Jackson Turner was wrong. Such a refashioning has important historiographical consequences for the way in which historians, and hopefully the public, understand Jackson's eponymous age. It makes sense that Cheatham, a professor at Cumberland University and the author of the blog *Jacksonian America* and the biography *Old Hickory's Nephew: The Political and Private Struggles of Andrew Jackson Donelson*, would tackle a subject that looms large in his state and professional interests. Cheatham ably takes readers from Jackson's riotous beginnings on the Tennessee frontier to his military campaigns during the War of 1812 and subsequent years, the passionate and tumultuous years of his courtship and marriage(s) to Rachel, to his time as president. The author excels in conveying evidence familiar to Jackson scholars in highly readable prose and skillfully connecting the personal and political matters in thematic chapters. Though the text of the biography ticks slightly above the 200-page mark, Cheatham has written an engaging and thoughtful biography of Old Hickory.

Cheatham impressively shows that Jackson, from a young age, sought to replicate the social and cultural mores of the southern planter elite. Early in his life, Jackson seemed caught up in proving himself and his actions reflected that desire. Horse racing, a touchiness when it came to protecting his honor, and a desire to create a social network occupied much of his time and energy as a

young man and backcountry lawyer. For Cheatham, it was perhaps not the duels that proved Jackson's southernness, but his skillful ability to create a social circle held together by kinship, favors, and mutual benefit. Indeed, the phrase "social circle," "social network," "connection" or some derivation appears frequently throughout the text. His network of social connections in and around Nashville would propel him first to statewide office and later affirm his national reputation that would shape his presidential policy. This system of mentor-mentee that Jackson entered into as a young man, and then replicated as a prosperous adult, however, was not without a flaw. Young men of the south were supposed to respect the men that took them under their wings, but the region's honor culture also demanded that young men assert their manly independence. As a young man on the make, Jackson had few problems acting out against authority figures. Once he became established, however, he expected complete obedience from his dependents. In particular, his wards Andrew and Daniel Donelson, proved vexatious for Old Hickory, because, as Cheatham argues, "the tension between the abstract social expectations of southern patriarchs and the reality of their wards' expressions of masculinity and independence," caused inevitable conflicts (89). Andrew Jackson Jr. also benefitted from his father's largesse, in spite of his own profligacy, but having such a protective father stunted his growth and made it difficult for him to learn from his mistakes. According to Cheatham: "Ever the protective patriarch, Jackson seemed unwilling to allow Junior to suffer the effects of his bad choices, thereby undermining his desire to see his son become independent" (146). While his wards benefitted from a spoils system of another kind—what the media now terms affluenza—the tensions inherent in Jackson's social network shaped his patriarchal expectations, and no doubt effected how he administered the nation. Although the idea of honor, and in particular Jackson's honor, is a well-worn scholarly topic, Cheatham incorporates the complexities of the south's honor culture into Jackson's story, and the ways in which honor was intimately tied to patriarchy for Old Hickory.

The ties between the South's honor culture and Jackson's understanding of patriarchy extended to other elements of his household, both before and after he became president. Perhaps Cheatham's greatest scholarly contribution is the inclusion of Jackson's role as a slaveholder and how he understood slavery. From a young age, Cheatham maintains, Jackson saw slave ownership as a sure way to gain status. Over the course of his life, this proved true as Jackson went from a small slaveholder to a prominent one on the outskirts of Nashville.

Tracing the growth of Jackson the slaveholder, Cheatham notes that from his first slave purchase in 1788 to 1803, Jackson was party to no fewer than twenty transactions involving slaves (27). The 1840 Census enumerated 111 slaves living at the Hermitage, and on his Alabama property, Halcyon, he owned at least 51 slaves (186). While president, like most absentee planters, Jackson found it difficult to hire an overseer to administer his holdings. The incompetence of his hires made him offer an "old adage" to his son as a warning that is perhaps illustrative of Jackson's political dealings: "'deal with all mean as tho they were rogues'" (144).

Jackson's patriarchal bent did not stop at the bounds of Nashville. Rather, Jackson saw himself as the head of the metaphorical national family upon entry to the White House. His time in Washington, soured by the sudden death of his wife Rachel, was made even more problematical because of Margaret Eaton. It is telling that Jackson wanted to control his cabinet, and, more importantly, the wives of his cabinet members, because he believed it was demanded of him by the people. "The nation expects me to control my household," Jackson proclaimed, and he was not about to let gossiping women best him (126). By expanding his patriarchal authority to his slaves and his political dependents, Jackson expected complete obedience and was miffed when his mastery over them was met with resistance. The gulf between Jackson's expectations and experiences shaped the way he responded to crises, personal and political, and perhaps made it acceptable for him to express such passion and vehemence against those who did not respect his manly, honorable authority. Once again, what Cheatham discusses here has been done before: he relies heavily upon the work of Bertram Wyatt-Brown and John Marszalek to fashion his interpretation of Jackson.<sup>1</sup> Yet Cheatham takes the arguments of those historians to their logical conclusion and uses honor and patriarchy as an interpretive framework in which to view Jackson's actions.

Where Cheatham could have done better completing the patriarchal metaphor is in his description of Indian Removal. Jacksonian Indian Policy, was, if nothing else, patriarchal. Jackson argued that he acted to protect and save Natives, in the same way that a father wants to protect his children. In negotiating with Indian peoples, Jackson also relied upon the language of patriarchy, and referred to himself as the "Great Father" and to the Indians as his "red children," yet Cheatham, who argued forcefully and convincingly that Jackson was a southern patriarch, makes little of it when it came to his Indian policy. Instead, Cheatham makes the case that Indian Removal was the

culmination of two decades' worth of fighting Indians. Rather than a patriarch, Jackson the Indian fighter appears as cold and calculating, a warmonger with little respect for Native rights or lives. And that may be the case, though Cheatham does little to discuss the contradiction between Jackson the patriarch and Jackson the anti-Indian advocate.

By refashioning Jackson as a man of the south rather than the western frontier raises interesting questions about regional identity and the nature of antebellum democratization. Much of this discussion is beyond the scope of a biography, but it would have been interesting if Cheatham discussed some of the implications of his regional refashioning. Cheatham does extend his story to the annexation of Texas, and declares that Jackson desired it, if for no other reason than to prevent British abolitionists from gaining a foothold in potential slave territory. If that was the case, does Jackson's Manifest Destiny look different because he was fixed on slavery's expansion? Moreover, does Jackson's brand of democracy, obviously for white men only, look different because he was looking south rather than west? It also would have been helpful to know if Jackson self-consciously identified with the west or the south. In a letter to Andrew Donelson during the Missouri crisis, he feared that "the Eastern interest' competed with the 'southern & western states' for 'political ascendancy, and power'" (76). If Jackson was quick to link the two regions, it suggests that political alliances, and antebellum identity, might have been more fluid than Cheatham permits.

In spite of these few complaints, Cheatham has written a first-rate, highly readable account of Andrew Jackson. By positioning him as a southern patriarch rather than western frontiersman, the author offers a convincing reinterpretation of Jackson. *Andrew Jackson, Southerner* is a highly readable and concise overview of Jackson's life and career, and Cheatham should be applauded for his efforts.

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*Adam Pratt received his PhD from Louisiana State University. He is currently a visiting assistant professor at the University of Scranton.*

<sup>1</sup>Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Andrew Jackson's Honor" *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Spring 1997), 1-36; John Marszalek, *The Petticoat Affair: Manners, Mutiny, and Sex In Andrew Jackson's White House* (New York: Free

Press, 1997).